

## **The Making of the Modern Iranian Women: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946**

*Camron Michael Amin*

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The book, a detailed historical examination of an important era of contemporary Iran's history, documents a variety of late-nineteenth-century views on "the women's question." Amin's attempt to review its historical background is an excellent gender-perspective analysis of the political atmosphere existing before Iran's constitutional revolution of 1906-08. The intellectual debate ranged enormously during this period. For example, the atheist Akhundzadeh blamed Islamic and Turkmen rule (Central Asians tribal rulers who had invaded Iran throughout Iranian history) for their situation. Meanwhile, the Babist Kermani, who called Iranian women "the living dead," saw their enslavement as the result of the corrupted Arab culture transmitted through Islam. The example of such "progressives" as Taghizadeh, who followed western ideas and used the most racist and sexist arguments against women's equality, presents an interesting aspect of westernization, which is brought up in the book.

Alongside these different views, Amin documents a different and equally valuable late-nineteenth-century response that sought equality for women within Islam. This trend, similar to that of Qasim Amin of Egypt, includes as its most notable example Jamal al-Din Asadabdi, who supported a modern interpretation of Islam that included gender equality. Mirza Malkam Khan, publisher of *Ghanon* (The Law), a newspaper printed in exile, was the first person to transform the "women's question" from an elite discussion to a matter of Iranian public discourse through the press. He argued that women must be treated as human beings with the same dignity that was accorded to men.

Amin delineates two responses to the women's question: a misogynist view that is best illustrated by *Ta'dib al Nesvan* (Disciplining Women), published during 1882-89, and a reaction to it written by Bibi Khanom Astarabadi, authoress of *Ma'ayb al Rejal* (The Vice of Men). Astarabadi (in some ways she can be called the first Muslim feminist) condemned such misogynous practices as infidelity and temporary marriage, as well as the drinking, gambling, and pedophilia practiced by some men.

The most interesting part of the book is the author's discussion of Reza Shah and his break with the Qajar dynasty. Reza Shah imposed his

own idea of Iranian womanhood – as women being under modern male guardianship – and launched the “Women Awakening” project. In this way, he brought the issue into the heart of the new monarchy’s political legitimacy. While Reza Shah is often regarded as a liberator of women, Amin shows that his “project,” which led to forced unveiling, was an extension of state authority over women’s bodies as well as an attempt to control the men who would be their guardians (p. 81). This “project,” which dominated Iran’s cultural landscape from 1936-41, sought to impose a single vision of modern Iranian women as unveiled, educated, and employed, yet comfortably dependent on the stewardship and goodwill of her many modern male guardians (p. 247).

The Pahlavi era is often viewed as a period of great progress for women in terms of freedom and emancipation. The book illustrates the roots of such liberation, which started as an attempt to emasculate state power over the making of new Iran. For example, such legal changes as the 1931 marriage law reform were meant to favor women, albeit under male guardianship. However, even as state-initiated reforms were implemented, independent women’s organizations were dismantled. The book carefully and systematically documents women’s entry into higher education as well as paid employment, particularly in the public sector, which makes it a very useful source for those interested in these topics from a historical perspective. The author’s documentation of the women’s press and the ideals of modern Iranian women as expressed through public discourse is quite impressive, and is a very valuable resource for researchers and academics. Amin also depicts that era’s contradictions by dealing with documents about the first women pilot and doctors alongside pictures of female graduates of the Academy of Girls and crafting of educated housewives.

The author then reviews the consequences of the “Women’s Awakening” project and reveals how their limited emancipation, due to male guardianship and a lack of political freedom, led to a break in the guardianship and the formation of an independent women’s voice during the 1940s: “...the most telling symbol of women’s political independence from men was the Women’s Party – not the Iranian Women’s Party or the Tudeh Women’s Party – just the Women’s Party” (p. 234) founded in 1944 by Saffiyeh Firuz and Fatemeh Sayya.

The last chapter brings the historical legacy of the “women’s question” into contemporary Iran’s political climate. Amin’s excellent analysis, which links history to current events in Iran, is a valuable source for understanding contemporary Iran. In this chapter, the reader is apprised of how the

perspective of equality is slowly replacing the complementary rights perspective. The author informs the reader about the current discourses on gender equality and their historical roots. He argues that, contrary to the expectations of some of Iran's archconservatives and despite the many setbacks for women under the Islamic Republic, the government's official stance toward women was a return to 1936 (the "Awakening Project") rather than to 1883 (the reactionary misogyny of "Disciplining Women").

For example, women's athleticism in the Islamic Republic (the Islamic Women's Olympics) is reminiscent of the early Pahlavi regime, in spite of the veiling and seclusion. To further illustrate this point, Amin draws the reader's attention to Salam Iran, a website ([www.salamiran.org](http://www.salamiran.org)) sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran in Ottawa. The site is an example of the extent to which Iranian women participate in the country's public and civic life. Another example of the current state of ideology is the Women's Bureau of the Presidential Office, which gathers a great deal of data and statistics on women in relation to arts, sports, education, and the family. Amin argues that even such themes as "Women and Revolution" and "Women and the Constitution" (Islamic revolution) are direct responses to the more recent legacy of the "White Revolution" (Pahlavi revolution) that have their roots in the first major legal alliance between the state and women: the Marriage Law of 1931.

This book is an excellent source for students of Iranian history from a gender perspective, academics, and those who wish to understand contemporary political issues in Iran. The book is also recommended for those who wish to learn about contemporary Iran more generally, as a great deal of what is happening there cannot be easily understood without an understanding of Iran's recent history.

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